

Nixon, Kissinger, and Reports of Crises

From the book "The Ends of Power," by H. R. Haldeman with Joseph D. Mohr, to be published by Times Books, Copyright © 1978 by H. R. Haldeman and J. S. Darjoe Inc.

A BRILLIANT, impulsive, witty gentleman with an engaging German accent, Henry Kissinger became a member of the White House team because Richard Nixon, in common with almost every President in history, had no love for the United States State Department. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said that dealing with the State Department is like watching an elephant become pregnant. Everything's done on a very high level, there's a lot of commotion, and it takes twenty-two months for anything to happen.

Nixon, himself intended to run foreign policy from the White House, as had Roosevelt. So he decided to install a Presidential assistant who would be chief of the National Security Council, and work directly under him in the White House.

And so a great team was born.

It is now known yet just how well Nixon and Henry worked together because two of their greatest triumphs involved two world crises as dangerous to the world as Kennedy's famous missile crisis—if not more so.

September 1970. Henry Kissinger charged into my office with a thick file under his arm. He slammed the file down on my desk, "Bob, look at this."

He opened the file and spread 8-by-10 pictures on my desk. They were air reconnaissance photos. "Well?" he asked. "Well!"

"Well, what?"

"Well, these are aerial photos. You can see that, can't you?"

"Yes."

"And the place is Cienfuegos, Cuba, isn't it?"

I'd never heard of Cienfuegos. Henry was bent over the pictures, peering at them angrily. "It's a Cuban seaport, Haldeman, and these pictures show the Cubans are building soccer fields." He straightened up. "I have to see the President now. Who's in there with him?"

I told him John Ehrlichman, Nixon's chief domestic adviser, was meeting with the President, but if it was that urgent, Henry could go right in. But for what reason? Was he going to burst into the Oval Office in the middle of an economic conference and shout, "The Cubans are building soccer fields?"

Henry stuffed the pictures back in the file and said to me, as patiently as he could, "Those soccer fields could mean war, Bob."

"Why?"

"Cubans play baseball. Russians play soccer."

And then I understood. The Soviets were back in Cuba. Soccer fields next to Cienfuegos meant one thing: The Soviets were constructing their own naval base in Cuba. When a Soviet U.G.R.A.-class submarine tender arrived at Cienfuegos complete with barges equipped to handle radioactive waste, we knew the Soviets were installing a nuclear naval base in Cuba.

Ignoring the 1962 Agreement

This was a serious circumvention of the 1962 agreement between the Soviets and the United States, drawn up after the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which the Soviets agreed not to place nuclear missiles in Cuba in exchange for an understanding that we would not attack Cuba again.

The Russian desire for proximity was based on a flaw in their technology. The United States was at that time far ahead of Russia in targeting electronics—we could pinpoint I.C.B. landings from a half a world away. To counter this, the Soviets primarily relied upon enormous nuclear warheads that didn't need to be precisely targeted. At the same time, they reached for proximity to the United States through nuclear submarines and surface ships so that the need for precision guidance would

be reduced.

But ships so far from the Soviet homeland required a support base, and Cuba, a Communist satellite, would be that base—unless Nixon stopped it.

By a self-serving literal reading of the 1962 agreement, the Soviets concluded that while they were specifically forbidden to base missiles on Cuban soil they were not expressly forbidden to base missiles from Cuba. In any case, the only way for them to find out how America would react was to go ahead and see, and that's exactly what they did.

Using the STIX missile system of rather cumbersome but extremely accurate surface-launched medium-range missiles somewhat similar to the now-obsolete American Regulus, the Soviets could reach their most important targets in preventing a maximally effective American retaliation.

Their strategy was as simple as it was brilliant. Across the Arctic reaches of North America the American Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) could catch any incoming missile attack early enough to allow time for a massive American retaliation. The consequences of the retaliation were unacceptable to the Russians and so the balance of terror was maintained. But like the "impregnable" Singapore and Maginot defense, BMEWS had a fatal flaw: It was only oriented to intercept an attack from the north. By maintaining the capability for a STIX-type attack resupplied from a Cuban base, the Soviets reach up behind BMEWS and within 15 minutes might be able to destroy all 21 American nuclear command headquarters which had nuclear release authority before sending their main attack over the pole.

By electronic monitoring of American military exercises in which our bases were alerted to prepare to execute a nuclear strike, the Soviets had learned which United States bases had the authority to pull the nuclear trigger—command headquarters, such as the White House, the Pentagon, NORAD (Colorado Springs), CINCLANT (Norfolk), SAC (Omaha), and the like. If the STIX system would knock out enough of them, the resulting confusion might sufficiently delay the American retaliation to greatly reduce its effectiveness. In this United States command chaos the Soviet polar attack might even catch a good portion of our nuclear force on the ground. With the STIX capability, then, minimized retaliatory damage to the Soviet Union might well make a pre-emptive strike an acceptable possibility.

Choices That Nixon Faced

What To do? Henry and Nixon huddled with the National Security Council, State Department and military chiefs. The first option was to act exactly as Kennedy had: Make a dramatic announcement on television and confront the Soviets with a crisis of war or peace.

But Nixon was determined to go the other way, toward peace with the Soviets. So Henry saw Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and quietly informed him that the naval base would not only destroy détente but spark an updated missile crisis. If the construction was halted, nothing more would be said.

A week passed. No word from the Russians. Kissinger made a veiled announcement in public which he knew the Soviets would understand, then got word to them again in private—and strongly—that the President would regard the construction of a nuclear naval base in Cuba as a "hostile act."

The quiet pressure worked. On Oct. 22, Andrei Gromyko told Nixon that the 1962 understanding would be

upheld, and in November, construction of the base stopped completely.

In my first months at the White House, sensing that I would play a small role in historical events as the man closest to Nixon, I kept a log of some special events.

Entry No. 26, entitled "Chinese in Warsaw," hints at what may have been most dangerous of all the confrontations this nation has ever faced.

The confrontation was between China and the Soviet Union.

This is my log entry:

Log 26—Chinese in Warsaw

On December 10th Kissinger burst into my office in a great state of excitement to report that we had just received word that the Chinese in Warsaw had come to our embassy indicating that they wanted to meet with us, and, more significantly, that they wanted to use the front door. This latter point is significant because any meetings with the Chinese before had been with utmost secrecy, whereas the use of the front door would indicate that the Chinese were prepared to have it known that they were meeting with us.

The world has heard of the Soviet-Chinese border skirmishes in 1969 along the Ussuri River.

What it doesn't know is that the Soviets had moved nuclear-armed divisions within two miles of the border.

United States aerial photos revealed this grim story: hundreds of Soviet nuclear warheads stacked in piles. Eighteen thousand tents for their armored forces erected overnight in nine feet of snow.

For years, the Soviets had been buttonholing United States leaders. The message was always China, China, China. The Chinese must not be allowed to build nuclear capability.

As far back as 1962, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara asked the Air Force to make a feasibility study of a surgical strike on Chinese nuclear plants.

What the United States commanders found was that at that time, they didn't have a nuclear weapon in the entire stockpile "clean" enough for a surgical strike. Our smallest weapon would have ended up causing millions of fatalities from fallout.

As far as we knew, the Soviets had no "surgical" capability either—but that fact apparently would not stop them.

In 1969 there were several overtures by the Soviets to the United States for a joint venture in the surgical strike. Nixon turned the Soviets down, but was then informed, to his horror, that the Soviets intended to go ahead on their own.

Reversing U.S. Policy on China

Nixon for years had been this nation's foremost enemy of Communist China.

But by 1967 he had decided that Communist China was a fact of life.

When Nixon took office, one of his first priorities was a reopening of relations with China. His foreign affairs adviser, Kissinger, was rather a reluctant passenger those first six months.

Then came the Soviet-Chinese border clashes, surprising the rest of the world, which had seen the two countries as one great Communist monolith.

Kissinger and Nixon huddled. They decided they would send a signal to the Soviets that the United States was determined to be a friend of China.

How to send that signal? The United States and

China had once held a series of meetings in Warsaw, but those talks had broken off. Kissinger contacted Walter J. Stoessel Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland. His orders to Stoessel: Find the highest ranking Chinese envoy to Poland at a social function and tell him the United States wants to resume the Warsaw talks.

In the atmosphere of the time, when China was a bitter enemy of the United States, and their diplomats never uttered a word to each other, this approach at a party would be a seismic event. It ended up as high comedy: The chargé d'affaires at the Chinese embassy, Lei Yang, attending a Yugoslav reception, was so startled by Stoessel's approach, he turned and walked out of the door.

Stoessel ran down the stairs after him. Later, Chou En-lai told Kissinger in China: "If you want our diplomats to have heart attacks, approach them at parties and propose serious talks."

On Dec. 10, Kissinger's unorthodox approach worked, as my log entry showed. The request to resume the Warsaw talks carried two messages. One to Peking, that we were ready to reverse our policy of enmity to China and reopen relations. The second to Moscow, that the United States and China had common interests and a Soviet nuclear strike might bring the Russians into confrontation with the United States.

Meanwhile, Air Force intelligence studied the photos of Russian missiles and nuclear warheads. Their fallout studies showed the immensity of the catastrophe in store for the world. It was possible that without advance warning and precautionary measures every man, woman, and child in Japan would have died.

In addition to Japan, the fallout would spread across Korea and Pacific Islands where more than 250,000 American troops were stationed.

A Decision to Make a Mistake

Major General George Keegan, Air Force chief of intelligence, was in Honolulu assaying the situation. He remembered that during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, his Air Force commander in chief, Thomas Power, had said, "Make a little mistake. Send a message in the clear."

Keegan went to the code room and told the clerks on duty he had a message so sensitive they had to leave the room while he transmitted it. He then sent a message to the Secretary of Defense "in the clear" (uncoded) as if by accident. The message said the United States had 1,300 nuclear weapons airborne—and named Soviet cities which were targeted for the bombs.

Keegan states there was a Middle Eastern army officer visiting Nikita Khrushchev at his Black Sea dacha when Khrushchev got that message. The officer said Khrushchev had four telephones on his desk and tried to pick them all up at once, calling Moscow. And that day the Russian ships turned back.

Keegan decided to try another message "in the clear" that the Soviets would intercept.

This time the objective was to assure that the Soviets clearly understood that many thousands of Russian citizens in Siberia would also die as a consequence of nuclear fallout generated by a Soviet strike against China.

At the same time, United States intelligence sources saw that the Nixon-Kissinger rapprochement with China, begun in a Warsaw, was having an electric effect on the Kremlin.

And just in time. The Soviets believed that if the Chinese nuclear plants were destroyed, China would not be a military threat to them for decades. They teetered on the edge for days watching the Chinese moving more and more under the United States security umbrella. Finally, the Soviets realized they no longer could take the chance. Intelligence photos showed their nuclear armed divisions were withdrawing from the Chinese border.

And Chinese leaders invited their old enemy to visit their country and resume relations at a time just before Nixon's re-election campaign in 1972, when it would have the greatest political effect in his favor.